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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 2431
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0363
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0734
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001695

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: POLICE ARREST OPPOSITION LEADERS ATTEMPTING
ELECTION REFORM PROTEST

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 1694 - EMBASSY RAISES CONCERNS
[¶](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 1691 - ANOTHER PROTEST PLANNED
[¶](#)C. KUALA LUMPUR 1684 - GOM TRIES TO KEEP LID ON

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark
for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

[¶](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Malaysian police on December 11 arrested 24 opposition party and NGO activists, organized under the Bersih electoral reform coalition, in connection with a planned rally at Parliament. Police released at least seven of the activists later in the day. Those arrested included five senior officials from the Islamist opposition party PAS and three from Anwar Ibrahim's PKR party. Six Bersih representatives managed to enter Parliament and present a petition contesting a pending constitutional amendment that in effect would extend the term of the current Election Commission chairman. Fewer than 200 people actually assembled for the planned march to Parliament, and the crowd dispersed relatively quickly after the arrests of the group's senior leaders. As of early evening December 11, charges have not yet been filed against any of the participants, and several key leaders were released after police booking. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Malaysian police arrested 24 persons, including at least 16 principal opposition and NGO leaders on December 11 in connection with a planned demonstration at Parliament related to electoral reform. Those arrested were acting under the umbrella grouping Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (Bersih), which on November 10 had carried out Malaysia's largest political protest since 1998. The opposition party officials and activists had planned a rally to protest Government efforts to push through a constitutional amendment which would allow current Election Commission (EC) Chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman to remain in office after his 65th birthday on December 31. Bersih alleges Abdul Rashid is solidly aligned with the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. Rashid's comments on December 8 that "there is only one regime capable of running the country" and the arrest of organizers of a December 9 Human Rights Day march further emboldened Bersih to defy police orders not to assemble. Notwithstanding Bersih's protest, Parliament's lower house passed the constitutional amendment before close of business on December 11.

[¶](#)3. (SBU) Late on December 10 police obtained a restraining order against the organizers and participants of the December 11 Bersih rally from entering the vicinity of Parliament and warned the public that demonstrators would be arrested on sight. In the early morning hours of December 11, police erected roadblocks on every street leading to Parliament and

stationed riot police both at Parliament and along the primary thoroughfare leading from the center of town to Parliament. Although Bersih organizers had called for some 2,000 protesters to participate, fewer than 200 appeared to be on hand according to observations by police. Police moved quickly to arrest key leaders of the rally, dissuading the growing crowd from continuing with a march towards Parliament. Riot police were not deployed against the small group, and there were no injuries or incidents of violence.

¶4. (SBU) Six Bersih representatives were able to pass police checkpoints, enter and present their protest memorandum to opposition parliamentarians who were standing by to receive it. People's Justice Party (PKR) president and wife of Anwar Ibrahim, Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) MP Salahuddin Ayub received the petition and pledged to present it to the Speaker of the House (PAS and PKR are leading Bersih components). After delivering the memorandum, police arrested the six Bersih leaders within the Parliament building and detained them for approximately three hours. Among those arrested and later released were: Yap Swee Seng, Executive Director of Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM); Wong Chin Huat, Writers Alliance for Media Independence (WAMI); V. Gayathry, Executive Director for the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ); Mien Lor, Program Director for the human rights NGO Pusat Komnas; and Dr. Dzulkifli Ahmad, PAS Central Working Committee member and Party Research Center Director.

¶5. (SBU) Police found themselves in a bit of a pickle after arresting the six Bersih activists on the grounds of Parliament. Opposition parliamentarians protested loudly that police had never been granted authority to detain

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citizens petitioning their government inside the walls of parliament and that such action defied the authority of parliament to invite the public to meet with their representatives. Human Rights activist Mien Lor later told the press that "the police treated us well and even apologized for their 'mistake'. They said they were acting on orders from people above, but did not explain what the mistake was."

¶6. (SBU) According to press reports and information from Embassy contacts, in the course of December 11, police arrested five senior officials from the Islamist opposition party PAS: Mustafa Ali, Central Working Committee member and PAS Election Director; Dr. Lo' Lo' Ghazali, Central Working Committee member; Dr. Mohd. Hatta Mohd. Ramli, Party Treasurer; Nuridah Mohd. Salleh, Women's Chief; Nasruddin Tantawi, Deputy Youth Chief. As of the time of publication, police had already released Mustafa Ali.

¶7. (SBU) Police also arrested three senior officials from the PKR party of Anwar Ibrahim: Khalid Ibrahim, Secretary General; Ang Hiock Gai, Deputy Secretary General; and Tian Chua, Party Information Chief. (Note: In apparent coordination with police efforts in downtown Kuala Lumpur, immigration officials at Kuala Lumpur International Airport detained PKR's de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim upon his return to Malaysia from a trip to Turkey on December 11. End Note.) In addition, police arrested three leaders of the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), a very small party without representation in Parliament. Police later released PKR Secretary General Khalid Ibrahim based on evidence that he

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was attempting to obey police orders and leave the area at the time of his arrest.

¶8. (C) Comment: The speedy arrest of Bersih leaders was fully expected, and now appears to be the government's preferred manner of dealing with public rallies critical of the government. Leaderless, today's rally did not last long, and there is no doubt that previous arrests and weighty

prosecutions are affecting the resilience of some
oppositionists and activists. Nevertheless, we believe
opposition party leaders will attempt to organize more
protests over electoral issues, civil liberties and impending
price hikes.
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